



From bondage of the will to Christian freedom

Human freedom

Martin Luther grew up in a Europe which was, to put it mildly, "bullish" on man and his potential. As a university student he was educated in the Scholastic tradition of Nominalism which taught that man, through great effort, is able to love God and perform other good works without the help of divine grace. Indeed God cannot deny a reward to those who perform such good works.

As a young man Luther also encountered a movement known as Christian Humanism. The leading light of this movement, the great Erasmus of Rotterdam, affirmed, if somewhat more cautiously, the Nominalist belief in human ability to do good works. If man does not have such freedom, he asked in his treatise, *Freedom of the Will*, then why did God give His Law to Moses? Surely God would not have given His Law, and commanded obedience, if man were not able to obey it.

Popular Catholic piety in Luther's day also assumed the freedom of the will and the ability to perform good works. Ordinary Christians were assured that they also could perform meritorious works which would assure them of God's good favor. Thus millions went on pilgrimages to sacred shrines, or visited relic collections. Through such good works people felt they were able to change God's attitude toward them.

Young man Luther: The experience of bondage

As a young man Luther also "bought into" this positive view of the human condition. He, through heroic acts of will, followed the path of good works prescribed by the monastic tradition, believing that such behavior would lead God to think highly of him. And he went beyond the prescribed path! He "outmonked the monks," and starved himself until his "belly button touched his backbone." Indeed, he later observed, if monkery could ever have saved a person, surely he should have earned salvation with his vigorous pursuit of monastic righteousness.

We all know, of course, that Luther's heroic acts of the will led only to frustration. The more he "freely" performed good works the more depressed he became. Finally he perceived the source of his depression. He recognized that his "freely" performed good works were neither done freely nor were they good. Sometimes they arose out of pride and led him to think to himself, "Bravo, brother Martin! How fortunate God is to have you as a disciple." More often they were motivated by an attitude of selfishness. Time and again he found himself acting out of a desire to avoid damnation and hell, doing "good works" not because God desires obedience of His children, but because of a reward God must surely give. Luther came to the realization that even in the best of circumstances he was "doing the right thing for the wrong reason." Always, always he was asking, "What will my works do for me?" He found himself incapable of good works.

In the midst of this personal crisis Luther was also busy with the Bible, and with earlier Christian writers such as St. Augustine and Johann Tauler. Luther came to see that the human will is not really free to choose for the good or for God. Rather, apart from Christ the human will is in bondage to the evil one. It is capable only of willing evil, be it the "noble evil" of the Pharisee and Greek philosopher or the more obvious evil of the thief and murderer. The notion of the free will is nothing more than "a dream concocted by sinful human reason." For Luther this was the lesson taught both by personal experience and by biblical passages such as Romans 8 where Paul says,

*"The mind apart from Christ does not submit to God's Law, **nor can it do so.**"*

Luther and God's Law

If, as Luther came to believe, the will is not free or able to do good, then two questions raised by the Humanist Erasmus cried out for answers. Why did God give the Law to Moses if man is not able to obey it? Is God mocking man by demanding what man cannot deliver?

Luther's answer was a radically new understanding of the place of the Law, an understanding quite at odds with those of both Erasmus and late medieval Catholicism. Luther insisted that God provided the Law to drive man to despair, to show him that apart from divine grace he is totally unable to meet God's demands. Man may seem to observe the Law externally, but he always fails to fulfill the spirit of the Law. The despair that flows from such an awareness, said Luther, is the gateway to redemption, for until we see our hopelessness we will not see that we must seek help outside of ourselves.

Not only did Luther find a new place for the Law, however. He also arrived at the doctrine of election. If man cannot choose for God and the good, and if he finds himself in despair because he is aware of this, then how is he to escape despair and seek outside help? Luther's answer was simple and quite in agreement with those of the Bible, of St. Augustine, and of Johann Tauler. God, sheerly out of grace, chooses us, lifts us out of the miry clay. And He does so irrespective of any works we may have done. We contribute nothing. God does everything, "*Sola gratia*," "*by grace alone*." Even faith is a gift of God rather than the one necessary heroic act of the will.

Luther and freedom

Luther said that God, by grace, lifts us out of despair and places us on "*the royal road of freedom*." But what is this "royal road of freedom?" Here Luther introduces us to a paradox, or divine mystery. We are told, on the one hand, that by divine grace we have become servants of God, and on the other hand, that we are on "*the royal road of freedom*." How can both be true? Luther responds that when we are, by God's grace, united with Christ we are freed from bondage to the idea that we must do good works in order to please God. This, in turn, frees us from the anxiety of wondering day by day if God is happy with us. "*Since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into His ... I am assured that He is faithful and will not lie to me.*" So one aspect of Christian freedom is freedom from anxiety.

Another aspect of Christian freedom has to do with "good works." Though we do not need good works to win God's favor, Christians are nonetheless "perfectly dutiful servants of all." We freely, joyfully, and willingly will God's will. We do this not because we should do so, or because we have to, but spontaneously and without concern for personal recognition or reward. It happens as a fruit of faith. "The good man does good works" as naturally and as freely as the evil man does evil works.

"A Christian does not serve to put God or man under obligation. He freely and unwillingly spends himself and all that he has, even if he wastes all on the thankless, and regardless of whether he receives a reward."

The Christian is freely a servant, by grace!

Luther for today

Luther expressed the opinion that the doctrines of the bondage of the will, divine election, and Christian freedom represent "*the offense of the Gospel*." He warned, however, that the Church would find it most difficult to remain faithful to these teachings as the years passed. His prediction has, unfortunately, proved largely correct. Much of evangelical Christianity today, while claiming to be faithful to the Protestant Reformation, rejects these concepts which Luther believed so central to Christianity. One of the more popular TV evangelists of our day, Jimmy Swaggart, has gone so far as to call these teachings blasphemies which stand in the way of evangelism. Another TV preacher, the Reformed Church minister Robert Schuller, while not overtly rejecting Martin Luther, has suggested that the Church today is in need of a "new Reformation," one which would abandon

the negativism of the old and instead promote "self- esteem" as the basis for attracting people into God's Kingdom. Presumably he wishes to abandon Luther's teaching that in order to enter the Kingdom one must first be made aware of one's hopelessness and sinfulness. I have little trouble imagining what Luther's response to such a "new Reformation" would be. Assuredly it would not be positive.

Luther was correct in recognizing the centrality of the doctrines of the bondage of the will, divine election, and Christian freedom for the Gospel message. Though many in our day have found these to be hard and unacceptable teachings, they are worth preserving and promoting in our contemporary world. We need not and should not exchange them in the name of "self-esteem," or in order to develop more efficient and less offensive ways of "marketing" the Gospel.

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